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U.S. Marine Corps Aviation: 1912 to the Present

Myrl Allinder
U.S. Marine Corps

Peter M. Mersky

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Naval War College in influencing interwar carrier design and doctrine, but too much of this case is inferred. Little nuggets of "new" information too numerous to list here proliferate in both volumes, while the appendices give all the statistical data on CVs and their planes that any student of carriers could ever possibly need. The drawings and ship plans by John Roberts and A.D. Baker III, respectively, greatly complement the many telling photos in Friedman's two works; which, in spite of the price of the design history, promise to be the definitive sources for the remainder of the century.

CLARK G. REYNOLDS
Charleston, South Carolina

Mersky, Peter M. *U.S. Marine Corps Aviation: 1912 to the Present*. Annapolis: Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1983. 298pp. \$19.95

. . . it is a great time to be a 23 year old 2d Lieutenant with a new set of gold wings . . . I hope these pages will show him . . . his heritage . . .

The objective stated in the above lines from Mersky's preface is well met in his book. The 298 pages—of which 96 are familiar vintage photographs of Marine aviators and aircraft—is a lighthearted, command chronology style brush of figures and facts. Marine aviation is sketched from Alfred A. Cunningham and the World War I First Marine Aviation Force to recent controversy regarding F-18 and AV-8B procurement for the Marine Corps.

Anecdotes and sea stories abound: Second Lieutenant Ralph Talbot and Corporal Robert G. Robinson, though wounded, winning the Medal of Honor (MOH) for shooting down 2 Fokker D-VII's in October 1918; the development of close air support tactics in the Banana Wars of the 20s, and First Lieutenant C.F. Schilt's winning of the third MOH awarded to a Marine aviator in Nicaragua in January 1928; the defense of Wake Island in World War II and Captain Hank Elrod's performance both in the air and on the ground which earned him a posthumous MOH; the chance discovery of buried Japanese aviation gas when the Marines were out of fuel at Henderson Field on Guadalcanal during the desperate days of October 1942; and the intense rivalry of Marine fighter aces Marion Carl and John Smith.

Some of the advertisement on the dust cover is overstated: "In this, the *first history* of Marine Corps aviation, Peter Mersky tells about the pilots" It is not the first writing on Marine aviation, and the historical aspect is rather shallow, as chronologies tend to be. Mersky mentions many familiar names and units and places associated with Marines and Marine aviation through the years; but there is nothing new. All of the items have been disjointly published before in various sources such as *Marine Corps Gazette* articles and Marine Corps historical monographs. But the significance of Marine Corps pioneering in various aviation aspects has been overlooked almost entirely.

More importantly, Mersky fails to discuss the roots of the pioneering, innovative developments by Marine Aviation. The essence of Marine Corps philosophy regarding aviation platforms, and indeed all weapons platforms, is that they must support the ground combat unit, and are therefore subservient to or in support of the ground combat unit. This philosophy is diametrically opposed to the Douhet philosophy of independent strategic air operations, such as long-range interdiction. This important and fundamental philosophical direction in the development of Marine aviation led to deep and oftentimes bitter fights that—including Presidents and generals—centered on the roles and missions issue fomented by service, and Congressional and Executive Branch adherents of the Douhet philosophy. Why do Marines have fixed-wing fighter and attack aircraft? While the controversy was seemingly resolved by Congress in Title 10 US Code, uniquely establishing the Marine Corps at 3 divisions and 3 Marine Air Wings, the political issue was refought in the Korean War, the Vietnam War, in the Pike Committee Hearings of the late 60s, in numerous Close Air Support studies by the Secretary of Defense in the 70s for Congress, and continues to be fought in nearly every Joint and Unified exercise conducted around the world.

Some questions Mersky did not ask: Why was it, while the Air Force was conducting deep interdiction far to the north, that the Army had no air support, and was in dire straits at

Pusan on the southern tip of Korea in July 1950? Could the reason for the first advances of the Korean War at Pusan in August 1950—which were made by Marines—have been the continuous presence overhead of Marine fighters performing air support as close as 25 meters in front of the advancing troops? Why did US and allied divisions disintegrate when the Chinese hordes swept down from the Yalu in November 1950, while the First Marine Division simply faced about at the Chosin, and destroyed 10 Chinese divisions on the march to Hungnam, then conducted one of the most unique amphibious operations of history? Could the answer have been in the continuous overhead air support provided by Marine fighters to the Marine Division, while the other US and allied divisions had none? Similar questions could be asked regarding Vietnam, and indeed, those questions could be asked regarding the capability of US air forces to provide support to US and allied divisions in Nato and other parts of the world today. The history of the establishment of Marine air command and control agreements achieved in the late 70s between Marine Air Ground Task Forces and Norway and Denmark would be instructive.

Mersky's work is a selective command chronology, excellent for lieutenants and captains, and of less value for field grade officers or serious students of history.

MYRL ALLINDER
Colonel, US Marine Corps